

REMARKS ON THE SUPARṆA/GARUḌA MYTH
(LATER VEDIC PERIOD)

I. *Introductory Remarks*

The purpose of this paper is to show that the Suparṇa myth is closely associated with the general idea of Soma sacrifice and the Vedic fire altar, and that the source of inspiration — or rather: one of the sources of inspiration — for these concepts has been the experience of the new-moon period.

As main sources are used the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (ŚB.), where the Suparṇa myth appears in a rather elaborate form, and the late Vedic Suparṇādhyāya (Sup.)¹, a text which abounds in textcritical difficulties² and which for its interpretation not only needs the *Brāhmaṇa* version, but also the even more elaborate version of the *Āstikaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (Mbh.). The allusions to the Suparṇa myth found in the *R̥gveda* are not taken into consideration here, because their relation to the later versions needs a study of its own.

Even with this restriction, the subject is so comprehensive that in a short paper like this no more than just a sketch of the main line of argumentation can be given.

What gave me the idea of connecting the Suparṇa myth with the new-moon period was the system of interrelated natural

1. Edited by E. GRUBE, Leipzig, 1875. Cf. also J. CHARPENTIER, *Die Suparṇa-sage*, Uppsala, 1920 (text, German translation and commentary: pp. 207-277).

2. See W. RAU, *Zum Text des Suparṇādhyāya*, ZDMG, 117 (1967), pp. 353-365.

phenomena that appears to be the mythical background of the *Mahābhārata*³. An analysis of the main plot of the epic makes it probable that Arjuna and Indra were connected with the bright or waxing moon and, correspondingly, Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu with the black moon or the moon passing the sun during the new-moon period. If we apply this idea to the Suparṇa myth and to the Soma sacrifice, we arrive at some interesting results.

II. Indra and the Waxing Moon

As far as the conceptions of the *Brāhmaṇas* about the monthly cycle of the moon are concerned, the following details deserve our attention. To begin with, the main oblation of the New-moon offering is dedicated to Indra and Agni, the Full-moon offering to Agni and Soma⁴. The Full-moon offering, so we are told in the *Brāhmaṇas*, reminds of Indra's victory over Vṛtra⁵, whereas the purpose of the New-moon rite is to help Indra out of a situation of weakness. Indra is after his victory over Vṛtra suddenly befallen by fear and hides himself. He is finally rediscovered by Agni, with whom he stays one night together (*amā*). This is the *amāvāsyā* night, the new-moon night. A similar story is then told about Soma, considered as the moon (*candramās*), who in the *amāvāsyā* night stays with waters and plants. The Sānnāyya offering, which is Soma mixed with cooked milk, causes both Indra and the moon to swell and to regain strength⁶. In spite of the fact that the *Brāhmaṇa* insists on identifying Indra with the sun and Vṛtra with the moon, I believe that the story actually indicates that Indra originally was connected with the waxing moon, whose victory over Vṛtra — the demon of hindrance — is symbolized by the full moon, after which he disappears and falls into a state of weakness. Soma must then

3. G. v. SIMSON, *The Mythic Background of the Mahābhārata*, «Indologica Taurinensia» 12 (1984), pp. 191-223.

4. ŚB.I.6.2.6; 8.3.1ff.

5. ŚB.I.6.3.31f.; cf. I.6.4.12, where both full- and new-moon offering remind of Indra's victory.

6. ŚB.I.6.4.

have been the divine juice circulating between heaven and earth, becoming visible in Indra, the waxing moon, and coming down to earth in the period of the waning moon, when it is collected in waters and plants, especially in the Soma plant.

The detailed version of the Suparṇa myth, it is true, appears in ŚB. not in connection with the New-moon offering, but in connection with the Agniṣṭoma, the prototype of Soma sacrifice⁷. But the situation seems to be the same as in the new-moon story quoted above: Indra needs the Soma in order to regain his strength, a process that is conceived as his rebirth. It is in this situation that the human sacrificer, the *yajamāna*, identifies himself with Indra⁸. Like the god, he becomes an embryo that is reborn from the combination of sacrifice (*yajña*) and speech (*vāc*). *Vāc*, by the way, is on the one hand explicitly identified with the new-moon; *vāg eva darśo*⁹, on the other hand with Suparṇī, the mother of the Soma-bringing bird — another evidence of the connection of our myth with the new-moon conception.

III. Viṣṇu and the New-moon. The Role of Suparṇa

The new-moon period seems to be protected by Viṣṇu, the god who by the *Brāhmaṇa* authors constantly is identified with *yajña*, sacrifice itself. That means, he represents the moon in its dark phase, the moon passing the sun, Soma passing Agni. Thus it becomes understandable that according to the *Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra*¹⁰ the Havirdhāna pavilion, the place where Soma is pressed and drunk, is with all its parts identified with Viṣṇu; he is the god who envelopes as it were the process of sacrifice. And in the Pravargya ceremony, which can be integrated as part of the Soma sacrifice, Viṣṇu is regarded as the head of the sacrifice. When the myth tells that Viṣṇu is decapitated by his own bow-

7. ŚB.III.6.2.2ff. + III.2.4.1ff.

8. ŚB.III.3.3.10.

9. ŚB.XI.2.4.7.

10. ĀpŚS.XI.8.1ff.

string and that his head becomes the sun¹¹, we may understand this as the head of the moon, the moon passing the sun at the end — which also is the beginning — of its revolution, when the moon is converted into the sun, as it were.

In Hinduism, our divine bird Suparṇa/Garuḍa has become Viṣṇu's vehicle. The *Mahābhārata* version of our myth relates that immediately after having carried off the *amṛta*, the bird makes friends with Viṣṇu, who chooses him as his mount (*vāhana*) and emblem (*dhvaja*)¹². Viṣṇu, it is true, seems to be absent in the *Suparṇādhyaḥya*. But when in the end Indra grants the successful bird a boon, the latter expresses the wish to become the bearer of the sacrifice: *aham Śacīpate vaheyaṃ yajñam*¹³. Now, we have seen that it is Viṣṇu whom the *Brāhmaṇas* identify with *yajña*, sacrifice, and as the author of *Sup.* still was quite familiar with Vedic ritual thinking, it must have meant little difference to him whether the bird said «let me carry the sacrifice» or «let me carry Viṣṇu». K.F. Johansson was of the opinion that Suparṇa and Viṣṇu originally were identical and that they both represented the sun-bird¹⁴. But there is after all a difference: Viṣṇu must once have represented the moon at the new-moon period or the process of the moon passing the sun, whereas Suparṇa seems to have been conceived as the energy necessary to bring about this process. He has therefore a close affinity with both wind and fire. In the *Mahābhārata* he resembles the third Pāṇḍava, Bhīma, the representative of wind as a brutal natural force, but at the same time he is described as a huge fire-ball, so that the gods mistake him for Agni¹⁵. And the Agni of the Vedic fire altar had the form of *śyena* or Suparṇa. As the moon is imagined to come down on earth in the new-moon period, the bird had to bring Soma down from heaven to earth.

This is the situation where our myth starts in *ŚB.*¹⁶. Here, the gods are on earth and desire Soma from heaven in order to per-

11. *ŚB.*XIV.1.1.

12. *Mbh.*I.29.16.

13. *Sup.*30.5; cf. also 12.4.

14. K.F. JOHANSSON, *Solfågeln i India*, Uppsala, 1910.

15. *Mbh.*I.20.5ff.

16. *ŚB.*III.6.2.2ff.

form a sacrifice with him. To this purpose they create two illusory shapes, Suparṇī and Kadrū, who are Speech (*vāc*) and the Earth («this one»). According to other *Yajurveda* texts and *Sup.*, Suparṇī represents not Speech, but Heaven. The two females make a bet, which is lost by Suparṇī, who thereupon becomes Kadrū's servant. In order to redeem herself, she has to get Soma down from heaven. She brings forth the metres, and among them it is Gāyatrī who fetches Soma from heaven. So it is this metre, Gāyatrī, which by the ritual imagination of the *Brāhmaṇa* authors is identified with the divine bird Suparṇa¹⁷. This connection is partly confirmed by *Sup.*, where Suparṇa is identified with the metres in general¹⁸. The fact that in the *Brāhmaṇa* it is Gāyatrī that is identified with Suparṇa must be seen in connection with the association of this metre with both Agni and with the morning-pressing of Soma¹⁹. It is namely in the morning that the last rest of the waning moon is seen in the East, approaching the fire of dawn and the sun.

IV. *The Version of the Myth in the Suparṇādhyaṇya*

Whereas the Suparṇa myth of *ŚB.* explains how Soma became available for the sacrificing gods and thereby also to the human sacrificer, who is identified with Indra, the perspective of *Sup.* is quite different. The birth of the divine bird Suparṇa is here the result of the desire of the *Vālakhilya ṛṣis* to take revenge with Indra, because the god had offended these dwarfish beings. Garuḍa becomes a kind of anti-Indra, whose task it is to humiliate the arrogant god. This motive seems far away from the *Brāhmaṇa* version, where the gods themselves initiate the whole action. If we however remember the conceptions connected with the monthly cycle, where the full-moon symbolizes Indra's strength and the new-moon his weakness, the shift of perspective, which perhaps indicates the declining position of Indra in the later Vedic period,

17. *ŚB.*III.4.1.12.

18. *Sup.*1.2; 12.3, 4.

19. *ŚB.*IV.3.2.8.

does not look too surprising. The dwarfish Vāḷakhilya ṛṣis may be connected with the pitṛs, souls of the ancestors, who according to hinduistic conceptions drink the last rest of Soma in the new-moon night and who therefore should have a special interest in setting the new-moon period process, i.e. Garuḍa, in motion. That the whole process is imagined as cyclic is however shown by the fact that even in Sup. Indra finally gets back his Soma from the same Suparṇa who first had robbed it.

We may now make an attempt to explain with the help of our moon-mythological model some of the episodes of Sup., which, by the way, in spite of their strangeness, are faithfully preserved in the *Mahābhārata* version of the myth.

Before Suparṇa sets out on his dangerous expedition, he complains of hunger. From his mother he learns about two animals living in a lake on the top of a mountain. These will serve him as food. Sup. describes one of the two animals as a huge elephant named Ghosavat and resembling a cloud²⁰. The other animal is only called *grāha*, «the seizing one», which according to Monier-Williams' Dictionary may mean «a rapacious animal living in fresh or sea water, any large fish or marine animal». The *Mahābhārata* takes it as a tortoise²¹. This reminds us of the living tortoise that is buried in the Vedic fire altar, which, as mentioned above, has a Suparṇa like shape. The symbolic meaning of this tortoise is according to ŚB.²² manifold: It may be heaven and earth or Prajāpati, who is the same as Kaśyapa (also meaning «tortoise»)²³ or breath (*prāṇa*) or the sap of life. It is however also identified with the sun. This latter meaning would help us to understand the image language of Sup.: The elephant can be interpreted as the moon whose body becomes black when it approaches the sun, whereas its thin sickle-shaped crescent resembles the elephant's tusk. When the moon in the new-moon period descends into the water, he is seized by the sun, the *grāha* that is hiding there. And Suparṇa, the divine bird, has to swallow both, sun and moon, in order to be

20. Sup.13.1-2.

21. Mbh.I.25.17ff.; *kacchapa*, *kūrma*.

22. ŚB.VII.5.1.1ff.

23. ŚB.VII.5.1.5.

able to fulfill his task of salvation. This conception becomes in Hinduism translated into the idea of Gajendramokṣa-Viṣṇu: Viṣṇu riding on Garuda and saving the elephant-king who is seized by a crocodile.

Suparṇa however is not satisfied with the two animals; he needs more food. So his mother assigns to him the people of the Niṣādas, barbarians who neither recite the Veda nor perform sacrifice. He is however advised carefully to avoid swallowing the brahmin living among them. In spite of this warning, the bird by mistake swallows the brahmin, who burns his throat, so that he has to spit him out again²⁴. This episode, I believe, refers to the deeper meaning of the Soma sacrifice: The brahmin of the story represents the *dīkṣita*, the consecrated sacrificer²⁵; he is swallowed by the bird and spat out again, i.e. he enters death in the sacrifice and gets reborn by it; whereas the non-consecrated human beings, the Niṣādas, have to die. Again we are reminded of the Agnicayana-ceremony, where human skulls are fixed within the fire-altar, giving evidence of the use of human sacrifice.

At one place Sup. seems to contain a direct allusion to the fire-altar: When the bird is at a loss for finding a place where he can eat the two animals, he is called upon to alight on a place called *bilintha*. This otherwise unknown word is twice attested in our text, in 15.3 and 5. I would propose to connect it with the Greek word *plinthos*, meaning 'brick'. This word is, as a technical term, probably borrowed from some non-Indo-European language²⁶. As far as Ancient India is concerned, this would not be surprising, since the use of bricks apparently was very much limited in the Vedic culture²⁷, and the technique of producing them was probably learned from foreign artisans. *bilintha* in our context does perhaps not mean a single brick, for which would have existed the term *iṣṭaka*, but a surface consisting of bricks. This

24. Sup.16-18.

25. The sacrificer becomes a brahmin as it were: ŚB.XIII.4.1.3.

26. See H. FRISK, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bd. II, Heidelberg, 1970, p. 562 f.

27. See H.S. CONVERSE, *The Agnicayana Rite; Indigenous Origin?*, in *History of Religions* 14 (1974), pp. 81-95; F. STAAL, *Agni, The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, Berkeley, 1983, I, 130 ff.

would at least best suit the situation, because Suparṇa, under whose weight the branch of the Rauhiṇa tree has just broken, is looking now for a solid place where he can deposit the branch and eat the two animals.

V. Connection with the Vernal Equinoxes?

The obvious connection with the Agniṣṭoma and the hidden allusions to the fire-altar in Sup. made me conjecture that the background of the myth is not simply the new-moon period occurring every month, but the new-moon period at a special point of the year, presumably at the vernal equinoxes at the beginning of a new year. The Suparṇa-shaped fire-altar of the Agnicayana-ceremony is characterized by a distinct year symbolism connected with the Prajāpati concept. So it may be more than a mere coincidence that in the very same verse of Sup. where the strange term *bilintha* seems to allude to the fire-altar, also the word *saṁvatsara*, 'year', appears²⁸. As a year-symbol may also be considered the tree Rauhiṇa, on which Suparṇa tries to alight after having seized the two animals. To folklorists and historians of religions the tree is known as symbol of the year and particularly of the turn of the year²⁹.

If, then, the Suparṇa bird on the Rauhiṇa tree points to a new-moon period at the vernal equinoxes, and if we take the tree's name Rauhiṇa as 'belonging to the *nakṣatra* Rohiṇī', then we have to look for the sun at the vernal equinoxes near Aldebaran in Taurus³⁰, and this would lead us to a date about 3000 B.C. This would mean that we are confronted with a tradition much older than the text preserving it. There are however so many 'ifs' involved in this problem that it seems wiser to keep the chronological question open.

28. Sup.15.3. This difficult verse cannot be discussed here in detail.

29. See E. FILATOVA-HELLBERG, *Drevo vremeni (O russkix kalendarnyx zagadkax)*, in «Scando-Slavica» 30 (1984), pp. 145-163.

30. This would be equivalent to the full moon near Antares, a star belonging to the other *nakṣatra* called Rohiṇī (= *Jyēṣṭhā*, *Jyēṣṭhaghñī*), just opposite the first one.